

“Sam Peckinpah, the Storyteller and The Wild Bunch: An Appreciation”
by Robert Culp

The world's oldest profession is not Whoring. It is storytelling. Of course, there's a certain amount of overlapping . . . or so it has always seemed to the Storytellers.

My first twenty years in the Theater I was always vaguely ashamed of my profession. It seemed all narcissism. Vanity of vanities, rendered quite literally. Then someone told me a story about Lionel Barrymore. Near the end of his life, he was wrathfully explaining to some young and foolish actors that theirs was a profession antedating any other, an answer to man's first communal need; to understand about killing, the nature of it. Which then leads to the only conundrum, death itself. All the recent speculative blockbusters in Anthropology and Zoology regarding instinctual behavior versus learned ritual would seem to bear out Mr. Barrymore.

No moment in an actor's lifetime ever again will equal his first entrance onto the stage. It is a splendid and terrible happening, outweighing first love and last, and the younger the actor the more indelible the moment. I had just turned fourteen. The next morning there were no more of those awful questions: I had become a Storyteller, though I did not know it yet. Looking back from here, there can't be any doubt that it was a moment possessed of the magic without which we would all wither, atrophy in numbed withdrawal.

Thank God and Eve and The Divine Serpent for our magic. The Eve whom we all love best, and look for all our lives, listened to the first story and believed it: she bit the apple and learned about herself. She listened to the first Storyteller and learned about death. It was the only thing she and Adam didn't know. It wasn't sex at all, of course; it was death the Serpent talked of. That's what the idea of sin is: a child's primer on death. And like most child's primers, it is not simply foolish nonsense. The idea that the wages of sin is death is such a patent truism that it becomes dangerously untrue, misleading for children's minds. The implosion of which un-truism we are just now approaching for the first time.

When Eve took the apple it was the first moment of magic; the Storyteller gives us magic tricks that transform literally and before our eyes one thing into another, unexplained and unexplainable.

That is what Storytelling is about: tricks; having to do with death.

For a moment in the day the Theater tries to do what the Church promises to do over a lifetime of training: to take away fear (hence anger, anguish) by linking us to death in great intimacy and then explaining it away self righteously (Melodrama) . . . by making love to death (Tragedy) . . . or by scoffing at death (Comedy). Each of these forms suggests that if you have the will, the courage to believe in it, in man, in yourself, you are superior to/in control of all things, even death. That's what Storytelling was invented to do for us.

By the time I was twenty-one and very wise now in the ways of the Theater, with many plays and much applause behind me as a writer and an actor, the magic part of it was pretty much gone. It had become difficult to believe. Tragedy, for example, could no longer be written, could not be played except by children in college; a quaint antique form, casualty of Grape-Nuts and IBM. Nobody proved me wrong.

At thirty-eight, after two marriages and stumbling through a third, with a blurred professional life of savage effort and little reward except money, only the old, stoic commitments to craft and children still untarnished, and, finally having lived through the year of the locust, 1968, in the United States of America . . . I wanted out. Out of my responsibilities, out of my physically and spiritually betrayed, utterly mindless country, out of my silly, truncated profession (where, finally now, even comedy is no longer relevant), where everyone I grew up with in the Theater and in Film is fixed, slack-jawed in endless repetition of patterns that have lost their individual lives, have lost the magic ability to rise Phoenix-like: all of my beautiful America is in the hands of used car salesmen on television . . . In our beautiful America, where we are now in our hand-wrought chains, one after another gleefully forged for profit, the screaming prisoners of man's noblest communal experiment, in such a short time by the mind made mindless, unbearably ugly, all our blazing beauty ravaged, bottled and canned on the counter for sale; all our brave feats and visions like our Great Grandmothers' buffalo-hair pillows for sale; going, going, gone), and then a man named Sam Peckinpah told his story, called The Wild Bunch.

Great and ruthless artists change the world, make it more habitable. They cannot directly change the life of nations anymore. The images we perceive are all superseded too quickly now. In the case of *The Wild Bunch* that is a very lucky break; if this film were to be considered more than just another remarkably good flick on the periphery of our vision, we would all be driven quite mad with its anguish. Among other things it says the only good American is a dead American ('. . . the Americans who are now all lost and gone were much better than we are, and what we have lost in them we will never get back'). All of which we have long suspected. In 1968 we proved it.

Mr. Peckinpah, like Malraux, is very deeply into Ecclesiastes (" . . . Vanity of vanities, saith the preacher, all is vanity. And a striving after wind").

In *The Wild Bunch* the story he uses is so simple that it doesn't matter whether it hangs together or separately. It can be told without any words (and has been). It is almost the only story there is about men as a group that always works. On four occasions that I can think of it was called, in English, something with *Magnificent Seven* in the title. The Mirisch Company has made it into a sort of conglomerate unto itself. It's a serviceable story. I wrote it several times for I Spy. Everybody does.

I read the screenplay of *The Wild Bunch* on a gray, empty morning two years ago in Peckinpah's house on the beach above Malibu. I groaned with each foolish page, to think he had to go and do this nonsense for all those bleak months in Mexico.

And sure enough, he went. With the script I read. While all the rest of us passionately dedicated people were at work in Chicago and New York and Washington and Resurrection City, putting the country back in shape, back on its feet intellectually and spiritually, this cop-out artist was down in Mexico, didn't know who was getting killed at home, didn't want to hear about it because he was doing his dumb Western Flick.

Nineteen sixty-nine rolls around and the rest of us, the dedicated intellectuals, having put the nation back on its feet and Mr. Nixon into office, are now staring dully at the walls, turning slowly again to work on our endless string of identical paper dolls, as Mr. Peckinpah quietly finishes his Western Flick that he's made and an utterly bewildered Warner Bros. Sales Department releases it.

Rather than making fools of us all he has touched us firmly with the touch that heals, the one that gives faith, strength to go on. We didn't kill all the divine madmen in '68. One was hiding in Mexico, just working.

Mr. Peckinpah has created a tragedy and put it up on the screen, which is perhaps as important in its way, in its very rude, empirical way as any single work by Sophocles. And the odds were greater against its being created. Of course the comparison is odious; it is apples and oranges. But as a spiritual point of departure (for that's just what *The Wild Bunch* is), it is terribly important for us to know that the creation of an artificial (Theatrical) Tragic Event is still possible. They don't all have to be on the six o'clock news.

All of us who worry about such things have presumed for a very long time now that there was no new metaphor in which to couch enough believability to permit the mounting of a tragedy. Mr. Peckinpah is possessed of an extremely devious instinct, however. He has taken the oldest form of pure cinematic Storytelling (*The Great Train Robbery*, i.e., the Western) and injected into it the men he knows and the women he loves (all of whom we have forgotten), and couched the whole in the only absolutely relevant, unmined metaphor, genuine anger. And genuine (as opposed to "realistic") anger as a tool in the hands of Mr. Peckinpah mounts very swiftly into a towering rage of passion, which, in turn, is the only emotional state in which the elements of Tragedy can penetrate an audience in a theater. It is a state so long missing in the Theater as to be presently almost unrecognizable. Which has been at the heart of the confused state enveloping the film's critics. What is even more annoying, Mr. Peckinpah is wise enough to know he must make us come to him, those that are capable: the material seems too lean, too oblique (even for film), deliberately mysterious, careless or clumsy. But that is the nature of Mr. Peckinpah's new "behavioral Tragedy" and why he is its only master. Behavior is behavior; you cannot explain it or you don't mean it. That is called lying. It is also called Melodrama.

Using the shorthand of behavior, Mr. Peckinpah has made a film only about the hardest honesty: life is bitter and cruel and very hard to get through, and men and women, the best of them, are endlessly foolish. And the absolutely imperative need to be Right is nearly always rendered corrupt. Maybe once

it redeems, but you will have to be ready to die for it. And practically nobody is. Except The Wild Bunch. As the odds against them steadily mount, their implacable enemies are everywhere before them. Each maneuver becomes an appointment in Samara: Pike Bishop (William Holden) says it low and clear, "I wouldn't have it any other way." With equally grim, simplistic purity, Dutch (Ernest Borgnine) echoes him later, "I wouldn't have it any other way either": a banal exchange between witless, simple men . . . but that is the gesture of will that is man's only salvation when faced finally with himself.

The Wild Bunch is about the discovery by these witless, limited men (which means all of us) of the difference between Right and Wrong, in this case by a process of elimination: if year after year for a lifetime you do everything wrong, you will wind up having done it all wrong, and nothing can change it. Since there is nothing else to do wrong, and something must be done, ergo you will finally do something Right . . . almost by accident. And it will cost you everything. This is exactly what happens to The Wild Bunch: it is called the human condition, and it is a definition of the terrible path toward tragedy. Mr. Peckinpah, to clarify further, states unequivocally that Good and Bad (resulting in any moralistic judgments, as in Melodrama) have absolutely nothing to do with it. Good and Bad are easy concepts for children and women, says Mr. Peckinpah; Right and Wrong are awfully damned hard to tell apart . . . and between them, after a given point of no return, grown men may not vacillate.

Near the end, after it has all gone wrong, Bishop (Holden) is putting on his shirt in the dark adobe room, sitting on the bed. He looks again and again from the unbearably young prostitute-camp-follower at the washbasin to the tiny baby wrapped in filthy rags on the dirt floor in the corner of the room. He begins to get terribly angry, and we, if we watch carefully, understand the silent, stoic question in the young prostitute's eyes ("I don't understand; how did I fail you?"). Bishop picks up a whiskey bottle, drains the last few precious drops . . . and just at the instant the bottle is empty, just then and with blinding clarity his life is over . . . forever. My God, what a terrible moment! All four of them that are left of the old Bunch, all of their lives are forever ended in that instant: they have it all now, the gold, the stake to go on with, but it's no good because they let the kid down. They let their partner, the boy, Angel (Jaime Fernandez), take the fall alone for being Right and made no move to stop it, since they were outnumbered hopelessly by an entire army. Bishop stares at the whiskey bottle. He shakes it. It doesn't come any clearer. It doesn't get any better. It's all over. (They might as well do one thing right.) He goes to the doorway to the next room where the Gorch brothers (Warren Oates and Ben Johnson) interrupt their mean, bitter little argument over payment to another (naked, weeping) prostitute to stare at Bishop. Finally, in one of surely the great moments of all time on film, Bishop says, flat as a mashed snake, "Let's go." The brothers, Lyle and Tector, look at each other and instantly make Bishop's discovery in themselves. And the moment holds: The Bunch is together again for one last go-round. The whole book of Peckinpah's Ecclesiastes burns in Lyle's (Warren Oates's) eyes as he turns back to Bishop and croaks, "Why not!?" No more words are necessary, just those. And it begins to open for us then, the tragic feeling, the knowledge and hating it of what they are about to do. They are going to hopeless war against a whole army, just literally throwing their lives away, not to do something noble or selfless as in the case of The Seven Samurai (though they do "save the village" by decimating General Mapache's army, it is completely an irrelevant side issue), but to pay off a mistake, to obliterate their error as Oedipus obliterated his vision . . . ("It's not your word that counts, it's who you give it to," yells Dutch at Bishop earlier) . . . and because that was the price of it anyway. That was always the price of it.

In the midst of all this (several minutes of running time) a woman near me in the dark kept saying, "Now, what's that supposed to mean? This is the silliest trash I've ever seen. They must be crazy." And she was right. She paid for a ticket, so she's right.

All of the divine madmen (Buddha, Christ, Gandhi) have known that to be right and to say so is a very expensive proposition. But we learn from The Wild Bunch that being wrong costs more, costs everything. And ends up the same.

That is all we know about The Bunch and all we need to know: just their collective behavior, just that. In 1969 it is supremely valuable to see once more in our fiction men who are only men make a decision (neither Good nor Bad . . . simply a Right decision, balanced on a hair) — and back it with their lives.

Finally, in the least creature on this earth, only the quality of his behavior is important to survival, to establish intrinsic value. That's all there is. The rest is literally only talk. And talk is a trick of the mind,

not very reliable: The Bunch spits in death's eye (for us), embraces the final knowledge of every man (for us), that he must at appears to suggest violent aggression as the logical solution to a pressing problem, and to glorify that solution.

Most madness in males is rooted in a damaged masculinity, in the overwhelming need to be sure where we are unsure, to assert ourselves precisely where we feel the most vulnerable. But these are the needs of all "sane" people, too. And it is to those needs in all of us that the Theater addresses its abilities, momentarily, to heal and to restore. If the communication is misread by some "madder" people, who misinterpret all communication, the fault would seem not to lie in the Theater. The very notion of a THEATER says, ". . . there is no danger in this place, . . . in you, maybe."

All folks of substance in the Theater are quite arbitrary on this point, but it does no good to frame it so; it simply sounds arrogant. Still, and quite flatly, the job of the Theater is to make people think, feel, and to give them strength. If "crazy" people get stirred up with unfortunate results, then that's what happens in that situation. Women and children get killed in wars. It is not an accident, yet it is not deliberate.

The final proof of The Wild Bunch is in its utter lack of actors. You cannot find one anywhere among the Americans. Among the Mexican performers, even when that old ego pops out in little flashes, it is curiously just right for the character. There has surely never been such ensemble playing in an action piece before. There is nothing in the world more offensive than "good" actors in a good story. It's one or the other. Either we have fun in the company of some good actors, glancing at our watches, or we are permitted to enter into a story that's being told. We cannot do both. It's like making love with the television on, it works but not really. No one but another actor can know what it cost experienced and powerful and ego-driven men like William Holden, Ernest Borgnine, Robert Ryan and Edmond O'Brien for their ego-less performances in this film. The price, I promise you, is high, unknown to almost everyone, largely even to themselves until later. But it was worth it and I for one thank them from the bottom of my heart.

For Warren Oates, Ben Johnson, Strother Martin and L. Q. Jones I have little thanks. In fact, they should thank me for watching their film. For indeed it is theirs, just as much as it is Mr. Peckinpah's. They are the iron nails that hold together Mr. Peckinpah's platform. He could not make any pictures at all if they were not there someplace (shades of John Ford), perhaps not always on the screen; maybe just in the bar at night when the company gets back to the motel. Even there, he could not ever pay them enough money for their help. It is a rare case of genuine ecological balance in the Theater. For these particular actors, their performances are the only meat they can eat and the only water they can get down. To act for Mr. Peckinpah is, for dedicated actors, nothing less than several weeks of survival.

Sam Peckinpah tells a story about meeting David Lean, whom he holds in very high esteem indeed. Lean, it appears, feels that the younger picture makers very likely hold him in contempt as old-fashioned, a linear Storyteller. It is a depressing thought. Near the end of their time together Lean walked Peckinpah through the exterior sets he had built for Zhivago. Looking around, he said quietly, "This is my hometown." And pointing to his Rolls-Royce he said, "This is my house. I live in there." He suggested to Peckinpah that the picture maker (as opposed in common parlance to the motion-picture director) is the last vagabond. Such men are not supposed to be happy men, the heartbreaking efforts of their women to the contrary notwithstanding. These men are supposed to keep a flame for us, and to pay everything for it, to keep it burning so we can sleep at night; they keep our dreams. The Storyteller survives; we had him before we had Priests and now we will have him afterward.

We are all rapidly becoming empiricists on this earth (rejecting everything we do not just feel) in terrible desperation. It is not the world that is growing smaller, it's us. And we are strangling on it, each breath a gasp. We can't hold it anymore, can no longer encompass its enormity in our little dreams. There are no more lonely men. There is only loneliness: poor fellows on the moon, they came too late.

Of all the permanent jobs, and there are only four (Priest, Doctor, Storyteller, Attorney), only the Storyteller may still be considered among the lonely, angry flame-keepers of old. The job of the Doctor is limitless, as is that of the Attorney, if only the Storyteller can keep our fainting spirits afloat, fight off our madness. We must be cupped, and held, and rocked and told that we may believe, that our wounds may with stoic effort again be bound. Powerful, unbending, empirical Storytellers can do this.

Mr. Peckinpah is surely the foremost empiricist in the Theater today. I know this man, and I know that

he has spent forty-four years holding himself together with barbed wire and a staple gun to make this picture. No other man anywhere can do what he has done. He is a relic, a hundred years out of his time. Like Pike Bishop and Dutch and Deke Thornton, yes, and like the Gorch brothers, he is lost and falling through space, as anyone who knows him can tell you, but by God, he makes a light! He is utterly mad, and I wouldn't have him any other way.